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Back Talk: Are Seeds for the Birds or Libraries?

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Back Talk — Are Seeds for the Birds or Libraries?



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While I think libraries should spend most of their time on the basics, I was initially very taken by the September 2, 2014 *Library Journal* article about the public library in Mechanicsburg, PA, that was providing a seed-sharing program for its patrons. This was attractive to me because I always wonder what to do with my half-full seed packets that are leftover after I finish planting my garden. Unfortunately, they didn't seem intent on solving that particular problem.

But as I read on, I found that if I got involved with a library seed-sharing program I might be labeled a terrorist! The local Department of Agriculture, it turns out, at least temporarily closed the library's efforts down, presumably for fear that home gardeners might later harvest some of their own seeds, share them with other library patrons, and run the risk of infecting the nation's crops with all sorts of diseases and genetic irregularities. One local official labeled the library's efforts as "agricultural terrorism" (see <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2014/08/legislation/state-tweak-to-seed-library-rules-ignites-debate/>).

So, I guess I won't run out looking for a seed library, although, I understand there are many in operation across the U.S. There are, of course, libraries that successfully circulate much more than books, journals, and AV materials. By surfing the Web, I found some good examples of what some libraries are doing:

- **Ann Arbor District Library.** Even in Hong Kong they had a toy library and they circulated art reproductions, but I was very impressed with the range of other things this library has to circulate: home tools, park passes, musical instruments, telescopes, microscopes, and "Kids Book Clubs To Go" kits which "contain twelve copies of the featured book, one copy of a movie on DVD (if available), and a resource guide with summaries, reviews, discussion questions, etc." (see <http://www.aadl.org/catalog/browse/unusual>)
- Some time ago **LibraryThing** conducted a survey asking librarians to share information about the unusual things their libraries lent. Responses included:
 - ball point pens
 - book carts
 - bones: cat, rabbit, and human
 - cake decorating equipment
 - cameras
 - construction tools
 - extension cords
 - fire truck (it wasn't clear if it actually circulated it. If so, I hope the lines were short.)

- gardening tools
- hammocks
- highlighters
- home energy monitors
- Kindles with books already loaded
- laptop computers and peripherals
- museum and art gallery passes
- notecard packets
- pedometers
- pots and pans
- rock collections
- shovels for ground breaking ceremonies
- scissors for ribbon cutting ceremonies

- **Alejandro Marquez**, a reference librarian at the **Fort Lewis College Library**, identified some other unusual items lent by libraries: (see <http://www.coloradolibraries.org/2013/12/19/unusual-stuff-to-borrow/>)

- bicycles at **Cornell University Library**
- fishing poles at the **Honeoye Public Library**
- sports equipment at **Adventist University Library**
- video games for Xbox and Nintendo machines at the **St. Louis Public Library**

- **Cortney Carver**, in a "bemorewithless" Web article entitled "Public Libraries and Unconventional Borrowing," provides a useful link to a list of tool libraries in the U.S. and abroad and a discussion of why and how public libraries are changing. **Carver** also provides a link to a great interview with the **West Seattle Public** tool librarian about his work (see <http://bemorewithless.com/borrowstuff/> and <http://www.shareable.net/blog/west-seattle-tool-library-interview-with-micah-summers>).
- **Cornell's** law library lends out more than 20 items other than books (see <http://www.lawschool.cornell.edu/library/WhatWeHave/Non-Book-Items.cfm>). It is clearly a Mac shop since it includes, within the long list of unusual items it circulates, iPad, iPhone, and MacBook chargers, and some wireless keyboards.
- **Yale Law School Library**, not to be outdone, has a similar list of things to lend, but also includes Slanket fleece blankets; Happy Lights (full spectrum lights designed to battle the

blues); and Monty the Dog, a legal therapy dog (see <http://library.law.yale.edu/news/cool-stuff-you-can-check-out-library>).

I could go on and on describing what other libraries are doing in the way of circulating unusual items, but you can do a Google search on your own computer for "libraries unusual stuff to borrow" to find those things. You would probably also enjoy reading a **Fast Company** article by **Lauren Williamson** entitled "Taking a Long-overdue Sledgehammer to the Public Library" (see <http://www.fastcompany.com/3035406/innovation-agents/taking-a-long-overdue-sledgehammer-to-the-public-library>).

While my 93-year-old mother, a dedicated public library patron, would be delighted if her local library could lend her a screwdriver (the tool, not the drink), she has more than once lamented that it was too bad libraries didn't circulate children. I think this is also a complaint that few of her own great-grand children live near her. Setting that reason aside, what she said was that being able to check a child out when she wanted to go to the zoo, share the joy of cotton candy, or provide an excuse to go see a film like **MonsterU** would be a great service. I didn't argue with her (mothers are always right, right?), but I sensed that if libraries provided such a service, they would soon be labeled something worse than agri-terrorists.

None of these very handy supplements to regular library fare take the place of comfortable places to study; small group study/meeting rooms; as well as books, journals, CDs, DVDs, and special collections materials, etc. Patrons still love the library as a place and for its carefully selected information resources. We need to make sure we spend most of our time on these basics, and just a part of our time on all the unusual stuff needed by our readers. When we do, people will love and protect our libraries. 🌱